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# The impact of doctoral study on university lecturers' construction of self within a changing higher education policy context\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of lecturers' individual current doctoral study on their own and collective constructions of self in a changing Higher Education (HE) policy context. It focuses on how lecturers, drawn from a professional knowledge background, make sense of new institutional requirements for new lectures to have doctorates. The lecturers themselves, through 'facilitated collaborative auto-ethnography', generate the substantial data and analysis for this research. This study exposes the enormous pressure of the doctorate on their lives and reveals different ways in which they resist particular forms of language, affiliations and positioning within their institution. However, of particular significance in this study is their own agency and collective voice, through using their developing cultural tools of research to 'be' researchers, in and beyond their own doctoral studies, in order to understand their own changing identities within HE. The study therefore reveals complex, contradictory and unexpected responses to HE policy.



## KEYWORDS

Doctoral study; 'collaborative auto-ethnography'; higher education; identity; agency

## Background and context

'Academic life is marked by ambivalence, contradiction and paradox' (Blackmore 2014, 192). Such a view seems particularly pertinent in this study which is focused on the ways in which six university lectures, who are also undertaking their own doctorates, make sense of themselves in the changing policy context of Higher Education (HE) in the UK. A growing literature focused on HE policy highlights that roles and identities within HE institutions seem to become more fractured amidst recent global neo-liberal economic agendas (Blackmore and Blackwell 2006; Evans and Nixon 2015; Maringe and Foskett 2010). As a consequence, research is reported to become more selective and teaching more driven by the student as consumer (Barnett 2005; Clegg 2008; Thomson and Gunter 2011). Such changes are influenced, and in many ways driven by local, national and global accountability systems ranking HE institutions in both teaching and research (Harris 2005). Associated policy technologies prioritise techno-scientific research that are viewed as more tradable commodities globally and can generate a form of governing knowledge that allows for standardisation, quality benchmarking and data harmonisation (Ozga 2008). To add to this competitive context, universities are continually evolving their internationalisation strategies, as branding and image become more significant within the increasing competitive global marketplace (Maringe and Foskett 2010).

These policy changes in HE are not in isolation from much larger global economic shifts beyond the educational arena. Although not the focus of this paper, Bauman's contribution serves as a useful

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backdrop. Bauman's contribution of the notion of 'liquid modernity' (2004) recognises that there is a restlessness caused by change, and fragility is exposed as systems rapidly evolve, creating more than ever, unknown futures. Bauman claims, this shapes the notion of individual identity, which he sees as 'liquid' and as a process of 'becoming'. There is recognition here that identity is 'incomplete, unfinished and open ended' (2001, p. 129). This echoes Jazvac-Martez's notion of oscillating identities (2009) and Boyd and Harris's (2010) recognition that there are multiple trajectories which can be seen as a context for the many and fluid understandings of identity which Bauman presents.

Bauman further suggests that the pathway to gaining and sustaining personal identities are treacherous. It is not just that 'the individuals are on the move but also the finishing lines of the tracks they run on and the running tracks themselves' (p.125). The idea that there might be a stable position or an ideal identity to behold thus seems problematic when futures seem so unstable. Fundamentally, for Bauman, notions of identity are closely linked with issues of belonging and community. The need for individuals to seek out a sense of belonging fuels the need to develop identity(ies). Furthermore, results in individuals negotiating their inclusion in many groupings – thus leading to multiple ways of being, framing and discussing self and identity. Such identities may be competing and conflicting and are essentially seen as socially constructed. These notions of identity and how different and competing contexts might shape and impact on identities frames this paper. Accordingly, the use of the word 'impact' in the context of this paper is seen as mediated and relational.

Building on this backdrop of understanding changing and framing identities, this paper aims to examine the ways in which, academics who are currently in HE lecturing posts and concurrently studying for their doctorate, make sense of their doctoral experience. The basis on which the doctorate was initially desired, the purpose it may serve and the reasons for gaining it seem to have shifted for participants in the changing HE context. Exploration of what this means for individuals, and the way this might impact on their fluid and unstable identities of self (seen as the professional, personal and academic) are at the centre of this paper.

## Doctoral qualifications for university academic staff

The requirements for HE institutions to respond to increased marketisation varies across universities and is closely linked to accountability metrics. This seems to be particularly the case in the universities which have come from a more practice orientated tradition, which in the UK are typically the 'post 92' institutions. Gonzales (2015) highlighted what she termed the 'striving' agenda characterising universities who prioritise raising their position in research rankings. This has led many universities to try to raise the research capacity and output of its staff. This seems particularly relevant in the post-92 intuition in the UK in which this study was based. Clearly, ensuring that academic staff have a doctorate qualification seemed to offer a technical solution to an emerging competitive problem. Such a priority seemed important in this study as over the duration of this research the university in which the research was conducted issued a new academic vision stating the intention for all new appointments to have a doctorate. For staff already employed by the university, and within the many other universities in which similar policies had been introduced, there seemed to be an implication that academic staff without doctorates were now in deficit. In the context of this study, although all the participants were already registered and working on their doctorates from their own choice, this freedom now seemed to be part of an institutional requirement. In essence, although the choice of undertaking this qualification had not changed, the institutional context making this a new requirement had. The significance of such a shift is illuminated in this paper. Thus, it was in this context of both national and local HE change that a group of academics working on their doctorates whilst being employed as lecturers began to meet together.

## Framing the research focus

The focus in this paper is on six lecturers employed in one post-92 UK HE institution who were also undertaking part-time doctorates who met on one campus in one of the largest university education

faculties in Europe. They had all previously been schoolteachers. These six lecturers were part of a voluntary research group (Doctoral Education Research Group, DERG), facilitated by a colleague (with a doctorate) within the faculty. The group had eight members who attended, six of whom were able to take a full part in the research, thinking and writing linked to this paper. Two were undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) and four the Doctor of Education (EdD). There were one male and five female participants. All but one of the participants were registered for their part-time doctorates at the institution of their employment although two of the participants had been in post for less than 3 years, the other four had all been in HE lecturing posts for over 5 years (one having completed 12 years.) The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact (in a relational sense) of lecturers' individual current doctoral study on their own and collective constructions of self in a changing HE policy context.

This research, to some extent, builds on existing work focused on becoming an academic (Archer 2008; Boyd and Harris 2010; Gale 2011; McAlpine and Amundsen 2009) and becoming an academic from a teaching professional background (Murray and Male 2005). Furthermore, it also builds on studies that explore the process of doing a doctorate from across the world (Colbeck, 2008; Halse and Mowbray 2011; Jazvac-Martek 2009). It particularly sits alongside Gardner and Gopaul's US study (2012) which focuses on part-time doctoral experience, and their feelings of marginalisation and not belonging. The paper is uniquely positioned in the academic literature as all participants were already in lecturing posts requiring teaching, management and research, thus assuming the role of being an academic, yet not having a doctoral qualification. However, more specifically this paper offers a perspective on two underexplored areas in HE. Firstly, related to the impact of the process of engaging in part-time doctoral study whilst also being in a full-time academic post. Secondly, how the experience of engaging in doctoral study is articulated and analysed by the participants in understanding and constructing self within the HE context.

## Research method and approach

The method adopted for this study was centred on collaborative auto-ethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013). The research and collective writing element of the research group was not its primary function but developed from the synergy of the group and a clear articulation of issues related to the process of engaging in doctoral study within the participants' university faculty. Elements of the research approach drew on personal biography and to some extent were initially framed as collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006). However, there was a clear sense in which there was a need to juxtapose self and context (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2013, 23) drawing the frame of reference towards the development of collaborative auto-ethnography. Careful consideration was given to actors' self-referential remarks (Sfard and Prusak 2005) so that the research was comprised of individual participants who considered their own views through narrative but also acted as 'other' and interpreter for co-participants in the group. Although this was a particular research approach its purpose was designed to offer a 'third space' to facilitate an accessible shared, supportive context which McAlpine and Amundsen (2009) recognise as important for the doctoral experience.

The focus of the collaborative auto-ethnography was also phenomenographical (Akerlind, 2005 and Marton and Pong 2005), seeking to create a shared understanding from the collective. However, as emphasised by Akerlind, it is important that a range of meanings were the focus rather than specifically identifying individual views. From this perspective, in early group discussions, as decisions were being made relating to how the group might develop, reference was made to a lead article in the Times Higher Educational Supplement (Rees 2015) with the front page headline drawing attention to the 'rise of "mesearch"'. From this article, it was decided to frame this research collaboration as 'wesearch' as it reflected the group's attempt to explore themselves individually but to also seek out shared understandings. It was used by the group as a signifier of our collaboration as well as its focus on ourselves both within and beyond the group.

The research approach used in this study was developmental. It was developed in order to accessibly bridge auto-ethnography and phenomenography. It was participatory, in that all those who were the focus of the research (participants) were involved in making sense of and writing the research (researchers). This adds to developing methodologies of participatory and collaborative research. Although the emphasis in this paper is on revealing how doctoral study influences identity, the approach and the findings are very much intertwined. The collaborative research approach must be further understood in terms of the role of a ‘facilitator’. There was a more experienced academic acting as facilitator and co-ordinator. She had originally set up the research study group which was voluntary for all participants. Her role was distinctive in two ways in this research study. Firstly, the facilitator was responsible for the logistics for arranging meetings, guiding discussions, co-ordinating writing and the sharing of writing. Secondly, in the context of presenting the work of the group for publication, the facilitator has taken on the leading author role of writing the policy context and methods and providing an additional layer of analysis, locating the participants’ research in the wider HE policy arena. However, the work has been discussed and edited by all of the participants throughout.

### **Ethical considerations**

Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013), offer in-depth consideration of the ethical dimensions of collaborative auto-ethnography, which was an essential part of the consent to participate that was negotiated within the group. The research grew from a voluntary doctoral support group for staff held in the faculty. At the point at which a research idea to research collective experience was decided, all participants were asked for their consent for the discussion to be recorded, for the subsequent transcription to be shared by all participants, and if any time a participant wanted to withdraw, their contribution to the discussion would be deleted. It also required consent that all discussion would be confidentially held within the group, and that any publication would have to be approved by all participants.

Part of the ethical consideration for this research included the fact that participation in the research would result in visibility for each contributor within the research group and within any subsequent publication. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) highlighted the importance of participants recognising that they need to be cautious in what they chose to share, and the way in which views are collectively reported. This was particularly the case when individuals’ research was located within and related to their context of employment. The group facilitator was directing and steering these issues in order to ensure that each participant was both supported and protected within the collaborative research process.

### **The process of collaborative auto-ethnography**

As part of the regular group meetings in which participants discussed aspects of their own doctorate study, it was decided that one week there would be a focused discussion on the impact of their doctorates on themselves, which might form the basis of collaborative writing. Although the initial narrative discussion was held as a singular event, subsequent discussion, analysis, critique and writing was conducted throughout the academic year 2014–15. Thus, the research approach was seen as part of a process of developing a group for collaborative auto-ethnography.

The first stage of collaborative analysis was for each participant to read the transcript of the discussion and to seek themes within it. In the transcript, individual participant’s contributions were indicated by numbers (1–6). Later in the paper, each participant writes a portion of the analysis in relation to a theme, each participant, is identified with a letter (A–F). This is to make a clear distinction between each person’s contribution as a participant in discussion (1–6) and as a researcher and author (A–F).

At this stage, themes were identified inductively by each participant (independently) annotating and highlighting on the transcript, seeking overarching concepts and ideas. This preceded a meeting in which key themes would be identified and agreed within the whole group. At this second stage, three key themes emerged: the impact of the institution, impact of theory and impact on self. Each was further broken down following discussion to reflect the more specific details emerging and agreed by the group. Theme one was further split to reflect the impact of organisational and policy changes in the institution, and the tactics and game playing which participants discussed as their responses to institutional decisions. The second theme was broken down into two themes which highlighted the changing role which theory and method played in their employment whilst engaging in their doctorates, and the role of language as a way of defining and positioning their changing role and identities. The third theme of 'self' was split into two in order to reflect two strands in the discussion: the authentic self (preserving something of who they are already) and the transformation of self (into someone different). With the identification of these six themes, there was further discussion to decide whether any of the data would be lost or replicated by using these six themes.

In the light of this discussion, and participants' re-examination of the narrative, each participant chose to write the 'wesearch' (our new terminology for our own approach for collectively researching ourselves in a shared context) related to one theme of the six agreed themes. Indeed the theoretical interpretations and ways of sense-making that emerged from these discussions had helped to determine who would write each section. Some of the particular theoretical frameworks that individuals had been considering in their own doctoral work were offered by participants as possible ways of framing, conceptualising and sharing the meanings of their experiences in this research. Akerlind's (2005) notion of 'relevance' and 'focus' offered a useful dimension to understanding the process of revealing the meanings from the themes. There was an emphasis on negotiation of understandings by and between the individuals who were being researched and were researching for this paper. Additionally, it was decided that our interpretation when in written format would be written in the third person as we moved our 'wesearch' away from ourselves and towards an external audience.

Part of the distinctiveness of this paper is that the choice of theoretical frameworks to make sense of the narrative within the themes were discussed and selected by the participants. Accordingly, this approach does not lend itself to a neat application of theory to data. Hence, in this paper, the particular theoretical frameworks used, which were mainly drawn from Bourdieu (1980), Britzman (2003), Holland et al. (1998) and Lacan (1977), are not discussed separately but are woven and layered within the process of participants creating meaning for themselves. Layered behind this theoretical approach, the lead author has structured a participatory space for the research and the writing to be presented. Clearly, this is not neutral, but the foundations of the stance and the positioning of the facilitator is exposed within the explanation of the context and methodology and is intricately bound up in the way in which the research group has been encouraged and supported to participate.

The following six themes emerged from the narrative as the central issues related to the ways in which practising university lecturers, articulated the impact of their part-time doctoral study on themselves. These are institutional and organisational legitimisation; game playing; knowledge/practice (re)positioning; reflective authentic self; the significance of talk; transformation – both personal and professional. Each of these is explored as a key focus of the paper. Each has been written by one of the participants who are identified by letters A–F. (There is no intended connection between the participants identified by number and identified by letter in this paper). Even though the themes are presented singularly this is not intended to in any way reflect that they are isolated from each other. The lead author, who is also the facilitator, has written all other elements of the paper but with comments and feedback from all of the participants.

## Organisational legitimisation (written by participant A)

In the drive to raise standards and to climb the national league tables, the 'striving' university like many others in the sector had recently imposed a doctoral entry requirement for all new academic teaching staff. Those staff who were already in post at the university, like the participants in the study, were deemed by the university human resource systems to have a 'missing qualification' and therefore not meet the 'requirements for your position'. As a result, there was a common feeling of urgency amongst the participants, as members of a 'profession ... under stress as never before' (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2009, xv), to complete their doctoral study in order to legitimise the role:

I got the job on the basis that I was going through the doctoral process so I feel immense pressure to succeed ... and do it as quick as I possibly can. (Participant 2)

We do perhaps feel under pressure. It is about status ... (Participant 6)

There's added pressure to get it done. (Participant 5)

There's a huge pressure to complete. There's a massive moral and ethical dimension (Participant 1)

This institutional requirement also resulted in a greater number of staff undertaking doctoral study, which in turn meant that research journeys were 'talked about between colleagues ... you know ... how far have you got?' (Participant 2). Another participant commented that 'in meetings ... I often go round the table and think, okay there's three of us here who haven't yet got that badge' (Participant 6). This suggested that for some participants this was seen as peer pressure resulting from an institutional aim and part of an internalising process of identifying and confirming a positional identity. The way in which individuals were rethinking about their positional identity within the institution links strongly with Holland et al.'s notion of Figured Worlds (1998), and is developed further in the section on the 'significance of talk' in the paper.

This 'pressure' could be seen to be further exacerbated by the University's annual review process for staff. The formalisation of research activity in the form of annual targets represented a shift from research to satisfy personal and professional interests, to targeted activity, which became a requirement. A couple of the participants referred to this process. However, Participant 3 summarised this point by saying:

I'd chosen the PhD route ... now it's obviously become a part of my PDR (professional development review) ... that's the way (the University) has gone ... in the time I've been here ... it's changed.

The comments here strongly resonate with Bauman's (2004) notion of identity being 'liquid' and 'unfinished', and forever is a state of becoming. It is clear here that their own choice to study for a doctorate had been overshadowed by the perceived new institutional requirement. This seemed to impose a particular shift in emphasis for them in terms of what and who the doctorate was for. Furthermore, participants identified that the institution mainly acknowledged their doctoral activity in terms of the allocation of a small numbers of workload hours and contribution towards fees. 'You'll only be funded for four years' (Participant 1). The neo-liberal agenda driving the institutional changes (Harris 2005; Ozga 2008) seemingly replacing their own intentions and priorities. Furthermore, this new role requirement resulted in many of the participants questioning their credibility to function in the role without 'the badge' (Participants 5 and 6). Participant 2 was looking forward to achieving the doctoral award as this would mean 'I can go into the lecture hall and not feel like an imposter' whilst Participant 5 felt that both the qualification and the research journey itself provided 'credibility with the students and really help[s] that relationship'. For one participant however, credibility in terms of the institution was not a concern:

I don't attach any status to it other than the status that I attach to myself of being able to do this. (Participant 4).

The majority of the participants were keen to make the connection between their institutional role and their subject of study although for some, 'the thesis itself has become removed from [the]



day-to-day job' (Participant 5). This added to the 'pressure to get it done' (Participant 5). The pressure was also seen in terms of challenge. 'It's the hardest thing in life you will ever do'. (Participant 1)

There was clearly a sense that gaining a doctorate would not necessarily offer the institution anything more than they were already able to do. Nevertheless, in terms of feeling that they belonged to the institution, gaining the doctorate had become a major hurdle in order to be accepted and be legitimate in their lecturing role. However, in conjunction with this response to the university policy, participants articulated very clear strategies for navigating and controlling their shifting identities and sense of self within the institution, which are explored in the next section.

### Game playing (written by participant B)

The participants' narratives of their doctoral journey provided an insight into how they understood their relationship with the institution partly as a 'game' that needed to be played in order to gain credibility as a researcher and lecturer within the institution within their field. Participant 6 captured this notion early on in the group discussion. She demonstrated a sense of acceptance and understanding that there was a personal as well as professional gain to playing the game, and consequently a 'win-win' situation.

[My role] is partly a game within the Institution I feel, but at the same time, I am utterly convinced that my practice as a Senior Lecturer at [the University] has been so greatly developed and I am so more effective and efficient and informed as a practitioner because of this [doctorate], that I see the benefit to [the University] as being really significant. I think I am much, much better at doing my job and in my role. (Participant 6).

The analogy of game playing relates directly to Bourdieu's explanation of how a social field of practice can be understood as a competitive game (Bourdieu 1998, 80–81). In the context of this research, the field was the university, and the participants were actors in the field. During the group discussion, the participants began to make sense of how their own personal 'habitus' could equip them with the necessary tools to 'play the game'. Bourdieu's notion of habitus is seen as the collection of habits and dispositions that allow the participants to practice in their context (Rawolle and Lingard 2013, 123). To be a successful player in the field, or as one participant described, to be able to 'join the club', actors need to possess a certain type of habitus, or 'feel for the game'. All of the participants were striving to find their own way in the field, and it seemed for some, the structure of their habitus had a direct effect on how they approached the game. Participant 5, in particular, was conscious that her own habitus did not necessarily equip her with the tools to play the game, and this was a particular site of struggle that she alluded to during the group discussion.

... I think the world is elitist if I'm absolutely honest and it's not necessarily a world I want to be part of but I feel I have to be part of it to be credible in the position that I'm in at the University.

For all of the participants, their previous status as school teachers had equipped them with a particular set of knowledge and experience (capital) that had initially given them access into a HE institution. Yet what they became aware of was that the capital they possessed in terms of their professional status was no longer sufficient ... 'as a Head Teacher if I went back to that one day, having an Ed Doc won't make any difference but here it would make a difference' (participant 4).

The participants understood that there were particular rules to the game that involved a willingness to accept the unquestioned opinions and perceptions (ie. 'doxa' Bourdieu 1998) of how to act in the field. This further challenged some of the organisational expectations previously highlighted related to what it meant to be and become a doctoral student and a 'proper' academic. Acceptance of the 'doxa' was a way to gain credibility and entry into what they referred to as being a member of a 'club'. Knowledge and application of theory was seen as a form of capital ... 'now I feel that I've got quite a nice grip of the theory' (Participant 3), that was a pre-requisite for playing the game. Yet the participants were also mindful that the theory they were utilising – the 'language of our club'



(Participant 5) needed to become embedded in their habitus if they were to gain full access to the game. Until that point, their position in the field would be maintained on the side-line.

I now am aware of this whole world of theory and I feel that I'm perhaps have just stepped onto the very edge of it whereas before I started this journey, I didn't know about this great big world (Participant 6).

All this knowledge and I'm just tip-toeing on the periphery (Participant 2).

All of the participants were playing multiple games within and across the fields. It seemed that the structure of individual habitus that the participants possessed played a significant role in their own logic of practice – or in other words, the extent to which they were willing to accept and utilise the rules of the game. This part of their construction of self within the organisation involved using new rules, which were particularly evident in the way that they juxtaposed the relationship of theory, knowledge and practice within their lecturing positions.

These two articulations of the narrative (organisational legitimisation and game playing) revealed that all the participants had recognised the message for the requirement to gain a doctorate within the university. They had engaged with what Bourdieu calls *illusio* (1998, 77). That is the importance of connecting their own mindset and disposition with the realities of needing to successfully 'play the game'. They had added some sense of urgency to doing this. However, the process of being part of this research may have offered a space in which this was being questioned. As participant 6 indicated

has anyone actually said that you need to complete this doctoral journey quickly and there are high stakes if you don't get to the end of the journey, or is it self-imposed?

It was clear that imaginings of meaning were framing the doctorate as an urgent imperative. Each recognised the call from the institution to respond in a particular way and have engaged in a process of taking on this newly imposed designation of having a doctorate. Yet the internalisation of this call resulted in questioning what such a request means both for the institution, and for individual lecturers. Participants have tried to make the process more meaningful by challenging the language typically associated with this level of 'being' academic as well as challenging what the game they are playing is and who it is for. There is some rejection of language, which is associated with being an academic and associated with doctoral study. The ways in which new theoretical understandings, which develop during the doctorate, are the focus of the next articulation of the doctoral experience.

### Knowledge/practice (re)positioning and rethinking (written by participant C)

Throughout the data, there were multiple instances of the participants constructing binary terminology to explain their emotional reactions to their experience of doctoral study. For example, consciously conscious/unconsciously unconscious, comfortable/uncomfortable, character building/character breaking. In keeping with such binaries, the participants also seemed to accept a fragmentation between 'theory' and 'practice'. The participants appeared to draw upon an understanding of theory as 'academia' in which research was generated by experts within the field, including members of the faculty. However, they saw themselves as separate from this process. The participants' backgrounds as teachers may well have been influential here (Britzman 2003). For example, Participant 4 discussed an experience of studying at doctoral level and the starting point of the rest of the cohort (at a previous institution)

... the other guys who were on the cohort - they were already, it appeared to me very academic and I was very determined that I was going to be grounded. I'm the teacher. I know about pedagogy. You guys know about this great. I'm going to start from here. You can start from there and never the twain shall meet.

Participant 4's experience suggested an encounter with divisions created by such binaries within other doctoral study groups. This acceptance of a binary logic showed how relations of power

were constructed and maintained within structures, by granting normality and rationality to the dominant term in any binary. They were recognising a powerful role for theory, yet creating their own 'context of resistance' (Britzman 2003, 40). This clearly had an impact upon the participant's sense of self.

Some of the participants referred to their emotive reactions to studying at doctoral level: '... the theoretical journey has been hateful ... really quite damning' (Participant 5); 'I feel squashed by this inability to access ... the right theoretical framework ...' (Participant 4); '... I am finding that [expectations of supervisors] very, very difficult ... I think that is putting pressure on me ...' (Participant 2). Their awareness and emotive reactions to normative discourses and expectations surrounding doctoral study inevitably infiltrated the meanings, realities and experiences that they presented within the discussion. Thus, those who were studying at doctoral level constructed 'fantasies' (influenced by 'cultural myths', Britzman 2003) of what it meant to be a doctoral student within a HE setting. All participants had previously navigated issues related to possible disconnections between theory and practice from their training and experience as school teachers. It may well be that their particular response to theory is linked to previous struggles in the process of being and becoming teachers and reveals the position of powerful dichotomies in the process of being and becoming researchers (Britzman 2003, 26). In part, this accounted for the persistency of particular worldviews, orientations and dispositions that dominated the participants thinking and the discussion within the transcript. Yet despite their clear articulations of a theory/practice divide, they were able to 'fantasise' different possibilities. An example of a fantasy that was prominent for Participant 3 was the use of language within the HE setting;

... coming here and having that language banded about ... he [staff member within the institution] uses language beautifully ... it was a bit of a shock to the system and I was thinking well I don't use that language and does everyone use this language ... they have their own community of practice where you use that language to be accepted.

The participants acknowledged some predisposition to take for granted established expectations of what it meant to be and become a doctoral student, including how the experience should be structured and what its content should include. Yet there was clear indication of resistance and not wanting to be framed in particular ways. 'You need to be able to speak this language to join the club and I don't really like to conforming' (Participant 4).

Each of the participants seemed to have entered their studies with 'fantasies' about the kind of theory they expected to encounter. Participant 1 specifically referred to an example of the theoretical perspective to which they felt they were expected to engage. 'I dissed Foucault for a very long time ... when you come into an academic environment there's an assumption that you should understand and buy into that part of it ...' The participant expected to learn how to use such theories to demonstrate competency as a doctoral student, by producing academic writing submitted to their supervisory team. Furthermore, participants also referred to the increase in their use of theory with the students in their taught sessions, 'I do go on in too much more depth about the different theories and I use my academic, sort of understanding to develop my sessions ...'

... I can relate to the students better and what they go through in writing assignments and getting stressed about the reading ... (Both comments, Participant 3)

Conversely, Participant 5's journey yielded a feeling that you 'have to align yourself to a theoretical framework ... feel forced into doing that and to reading things'. This provided an insight into the position that theory had within doctoral studies but also revealed that some doctoral students resisted buying into 'playing the game' as previously discussed. The fantasy that Participant 5 had established of what it meant to become and be a doctoral student, opposed any desire to accept the established construct of the theory/practice binary, thus conforming to the normative discourses that shaped doctoral study. For this participant, in particular, there was an indication that their fantasy revolved around the starting point of their research being the practical

element of their study – ‘I wanted to gather data, to listen to ... my participants ... then worry about all that [theory] afterwards’.

There seemed to be a clear scope for articulation here in terms of Lacan’s (1977) notion of subject’s identifications with images of self and social relations. The doctoral students’ ‘fantasies’ of their sense of self, was an ‘Imaginary’ identification – a delusory mirror image that they had for themselves. Meanwhile, their fantasies of the world were processed through the ‘Symbolic’, the ideological apparatus and normative discourses that surrounded them. Thus, the human subject was always incomplete and self-identifications were captured in an ‘image’. In this study, this ‘image’ related to the fantasies that the doctoral students had about becoming and being a ‘credible’ researcher. To some extent, participants were presenting a tale reflecting a sense of inadequacy in their own and collective narrative stories, which they were also attempting to re-write through their doctorates. Furthermore, it was perhaps through a research process, such as that afforded in this collaborative auto-ethnography that they could contribute to the ways in which such fantasies might become normalised and shared.

What the participants had not anticipated was that by pursuing their fantasies of what it meant to become and be a doctoral student, what was going to be simultaneously shaped, was their sense of self. This dual struggle has helped to further construct and reveal that the doctoral student’s immediate experience of their doctoral studies was as a site of profound conflict. Such conflict was further identified as notions of identity were extended into the relationship between academic, professional and personal as shifting identities were articulated within a notion of preserving ‘authenticity’ in the following section.

### **The authentic self (written by participant D)**

In grappling with the conflicts that undertaking a doctorate had for the participants, their relationship with the institution, with their own changing sense of being a lecturer and their own professional and theoretical understandings were revealed. Emerging from the analysis of the narrative there was a clear sense that participants were seeking to consider themselves as doctoral participants alongside their professional and personal identities, which also helped to offset their feelings of tension and conflict. Identities were seen as multiple, shifting and incomplete, emphasising Bauman’s notion of fluidity. Yet, there was a clear attempt to be ‘authentic’ which, according to Bonnett (1978) and Kreber (2010) explored the coherence between thought and action in the expression of one’s self. Hence, there was a sense in which the fluidity and incompleteness of identities (Bauman 2001) needed to be shaped and felt as more uniquely ‘authentic’ for each participant.

Within the collective narrative, challenges surrounding authenticity were highlighted. There was a sense that there was a personal balance to be gained, albeit with factors shifting and changing. Partly this drew on issues related to the theory/practice binary previously discussed and the idea of a strand running through the past, present and future being sought by individuals. Participant 3 revealed how there was an overarching sense of a pathway which was authentic for them and how experiences that did not fit with these views were problematic.

People in research who didn’t know the background to it (doctoral study) were sort of pushing me into using different people, different theories ... maybe I am just thinking the wrong way ... (Participant 3)

Such tensions were also evident in professional aspects of their lecturing role. It was clear that doctoral experiences had enabled them to think differently about their teaching roles.

I am so much more effective and efficient and informed as a practitioner because of this process. (Participant 6)

I think I can relate to the students better ... cope. (Participant 3)

My identity now ... is as a critical pedagogue ... and identity permeates all the way through ... driving how I teach, how I’m doing my research (Participant 4)

Whilst this presents a positive impact around professional authenticity, tensions around authenticity in the social and familial context were also prevalent. These tensions were generated around ways in which thinking had developed and deepened, and drawn participants away from perceived superficiality in friendships, towards challenging differing perspectives in social conversations.

I don't have any depth of conversation [with previous friends] ... I am no longer able to let things go ... I have to say 'but what do you mean by that?' ... I look at those friends I no longer have a relationship with and realise they haven't changed. (Participant 6)

Participants also reflected on how their multiple identities, particularly as parents, had also been enveloped in a deepening cohesion between thought and action, which had changed since their doctoral studies.

I see myself as a ... mother-researcher or a researcher-mother depending on the context ... and as I'm dealing with educational issues it gives me a broader background. (Participant 3)

With my now gendered consciousness ... I am trying to be a different parent ... these things all need to move on in harmony. (Participant 4)

The notion of authenticity, and the participants' reference to it, directly or indirectly gave particular insights into how identity was internalised and created an understanding of self and a desired complex sense of self that was quite different from the academic that the institution sought to create in requiring a doctoral award. There were clear attempts to make sense of the doctoral experience outside and beyond the context of the institution in ways that resisted a simple institutional designation that all lecturers should have a doctorate. It was clear that the doctoral experience was framing and shaping family and friendships for the participants as well as their academic role. This was further explored in the next section as participants were self-authoring their changing identities in ways which were authentic to their own desired ends.

### **The significance of talk (written by participant E)**

It was clear from the transcript that 'talk' was significant in the ways in which the participants made sense of their positioning as doctoral students. This included the 'talk' of others as well as their own response to uses of language. Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of 'figured worlds' offers a useful way of making sense of understanding of self through use of 'talk'. A 'figured world' is 'a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others' (Holland et al. 1998, 52). In figured worlds, people understand who they are through cultural messages which come in many forms, one of which being language. The participants referred to the importance of language as a cultural symbol in the figured world of doctoral studies, recognising the significance of 'the language of our club' as a tool to use and to be seen using by others in the world.

This was illustrated by Participant 4 by raising the importance of using certain language forms within the figured world of doctoral studies:

I've ... not really wanted to talk and am worried about talking now in case my language is not the accepted language. I know what I want to say but I'm conscious there's certain words that I should be using ... I feel squashed down by this inability to access the language.

There was an acute awareness of the 'assigned meaning' (Holland et al. 1998, 36) that was associated with 'accepted language' within the figured world. This particular 'talk' was identifiable by Participant 4 and carried collective meaning and status. However, there was also evidence here that using 'accepted language' did not come easily. Participant 4 was fully aware of the need to use it as a doctoral student but acknowledged a struggle to access this cultural tool, which appeared to have particular importance as a tool of agency within the world of academia. Without it, participant 4's felt 'squashed' by an 'inability', suggesting strong feelings in relation to a lack of agency as a researcher who may not be accepted as such.

Others also said that they struggled with accessing this powerful cultural tool. Participant 5 indicated that she shared the perceived need to become accepted as part of the 'discourse community', indicating that 'for some people they can fit in very easily and perhaps they seemed to be empowered by doing [a] doctorate and for me, it's the only area where I feel I lack a lot of confidence'. For participant 5, 'fitting in' to the figured world of doctoral studies and being accepted empowered those who can use the language, leaving others like herself feeling insecure and by implication lacking in agency. When asked why she continued ... 'it's the language. I think it's all the "ologies" and the "isms" and the feeling of [being] forced to arm myself with something'. Unable to access the important cultural symbol of language, specifically academic language in both the university research culture and supervisions, she expressed a real strength of feeling in her choice of words: that she feels 'forced' to 'arm' herself suggested a perceived need to defend herself from not being accepted in a world where she cannot therefore have agency.

Participant 1 was more confident with using these significant cultural tools. Here Participant 1 tells of being recognised by others in the figured world as legitimate when using specific language, stating: 'My colleagues have commented on that [use of theoretical language] ... they've seen a difference in how I teach'. By referring to other important individuals (significant actors) that inhabit the figured world, Participant 1 is 'self-authoring' by making herself 'knowable, in the words of others' (Holland et al. 1998, 173). Her reference to comments from colleagues indicated to the rest of the group that she was comfortable and able to use this powerful cultural tool: theoretical language. By relating this story of what significant others have said, she positions herself as a legitimate user of this 'talk'.

The process of becoming a researcher through doctoral studies was not complete, simple, linear, quick or easy. Some of the participants had found a 'space for authoring' (Holland et al. 1998), using specific cultural tools within the figured world of academia, which provided them with agency to 'self-author' as 'academics-to-be'. Others were struggling to access the cultural symbol of language, still experimenting with possible ways of using and developing it as a dimension of their doctoral thinking. Yet for everyone there was a tremendous sense of change, the organisational context significantly contributing to their sense of struggle, which is echoed in the final theme of transformations.

## Transformations (written by participant F)

A clear and recurring theme within the group and throughout the discussion was the emerging confusion around distinctions which were revealed as academic, personal and professional strands of identity, and a quest to understand 'who I am' and 'who do I want to be'? Understanding identity shifts, crises and re-emergings, link well to Bauman's notion of identity as 'liquid' and individuals continually 'becoming' in different contexts (Bauman 2004)

I suppose I'm kind of exploring my identity as a teacher educator as I'm exploring my identity as a doctoral student ... I'm trying to work out me (Participant 2)

There was a sense in which the significance of the changes could not be ignored and were identified in terms of being transformative. Yet the nature of these transformations was variable for the different participants.

A suggestion that the nature of doctoral study was 'character breaking' (Participant 4) generated discussion around the 'dismantling' (Participant 6) or breaking down of the individual, creating conditions to enable the 'rebuilding a new fuller person' (Participant 4). The notion of rebuilding or remodelling a new improved self, potentially a more authentic version of 'self', supported the suggestion that doctoral study indeed involved a 'transformation' of the individual and their behaviours. Mezirow's (2000, 14) notions of transformation which combine reflection and discourse and act on meaning systems as well as action certainly seem to have some connection here. Any such transformation would inevitably have consequences for both professional and personal identities and may be both liberating and oppressive. 'Liberating' was expressed as enabling the student-lecturer/lecturer-

student to 'be more comfortable with the unknown' (Participant 3) and more confident in their teaching and relationships with students. 'I share with the students what I do and how I cope ...' (Participant 3). Another group member suggested that sharing her research gave her 'credibility with the students and really does help with that relationship' (Participant 5). Transformation within individual's professional practice was acknowledged as Participant 6 commented that as a result of undertaking her doctorate she felt 'I think I am much better at doing my job and in my role'.

Conversely there was also a suggestion that feelings of oppression may have emerged as a consequence of recognised tensions between the 'new self' existing in the world of the 'old self' i.e. the pre-doctoral world. Participant 6 reflected on the impact the doctoral journey had on personal relationships suggesting that the shift towards greater critical thinking and objectivity, as required by doctoral level study, challenged her ability to navigate social situations. Greater criticality created a seismic shift in how relationships and friendships were constructed, managed and maintained resulting in a series of casualties within long-standing friendships. Where the 'old-self' would have been both able, and happy, to filter and steer around contentious issues, as the 'new self', 'I am no longer able to just let things go and I have to say.. "what do you mean by that?"' In considering the impact doctoral study had on personal relationships Participant 5 commented, 'I've got no friends either but that's because I never see them. It's because I keep cancelling and I haven't seen anybody and I just want to have a life back'. The suggestion here is that transformations may represent personal cost that was arguably not an anticipated 'fantasised' consequence of the doctoral process.

The transformations of the personal self were more problematic and illuminated tensions between the pre-doctoral self and mid-doctoral self. The mid-doctoral self, inhabits the same world but in viewing that world through a different lens, no longer a myopic lens, struggles to make sense of her/his place. This raised interesting consideration of what the post-doctoral self may recognise as characterising the ultimate transformation at the end of the doctoral journey. With this in mind participants found it difficult to articulate specifically what they anticipated gaining the doctorate would be like. It very much illustrates Bauman's views of the end goals ahead changing, as well as the tracks towards them. Furthermore, it highlights the transformations of identities as continual and in many cases treacherous.

## Significant findings from the research

The story drawn together within this paper is powerful. The participants have presented their own collective narrative, and the picture which emerges is complex, contradictory and enormously significant in making sense of the impact of HE policy on the lives of those who it influences. There were clear messages that the participants felt under pressure (Participants 2, 5 and 6) lacking credibility (Participants 2 and 5) not having 'the badge' (Participants 5 and 6), feeling oppressed by the institution (Participant F), being alienated from the language of research (Participants 3, 4), isolated and without friends (Participants 5 and 6). Even though the policy agenda, signalling that doctorates would be mandatory for new appointments, was not specifically levied at them, they had identified themselves as being in deficit and had created pressures for themselves. The participants had acknowledged that this was partly self-imposed (Participant 6), yet also identified themselves as having an inferior positioning in terms of the requirements of University policy. To some extent, the participants in recognising themselves as being in deficit, had a 'simple' solution – get your doctorate as quickly as you can. This straightforward solution, in a technical sense, framed the doctoral requirement as merely gaining a doctorate. Largely this was their goal. If this could be achieved, they could move on. The goal was to 'join the club', 'go into the lecture hall and not feel like an imposter', 'get my life back'. There was a great sense in which successful doctorate completion would provide the required answer to their being (implicitly) identified as a problem for the successful realisation of the new vision for the university. The participants struggled to see beyond gaining their doctorate. Therefore, in one sense any vision of 'striving' (Gonzales 2015) was constrained by individuals. It



echoes Ozga's (2008) view that such policy changes become part of a techno-scientific agenda. Certainly, in the participants' view, gaining the doctorate had become a hurdle to leap. The very process that was designed to develop the research capacity within the institution seemed to be curtailing it. Furthermore, the participants, having glimpsed the academic world that the doctorate opened to them, did not necessarily want to be a part of what they saw. They identified themselves as marginalised, constructed by 'others' and a problem.

Of particular interest in this study is how the participants, in collaboration, revealed alternative positionings to counteract those that they felt the institution made of them. They referenced these in terms of their own authentic selves, and transformations of themselves, personally, socially and academically. Furthermore, within the interpretative data that they have considered, they offered three particular strategies revealing ways in which they actively enacted their own personal agency within the institution. Firstly, participant B suggested that there was a sense in which the participants used strategies of 'game playing' to juxtapose both the opportunities and limitations available to them within the institution. Secondly, participant C suggested that there was evidence of the ways in which participants used their own fantasies to envisage a new vision of a credible researcher. Even though they had struggled to make this a reality, participant C suggested that the collective voice of this struggle, through the research group offered a way for these fantasies not only to be revealed but 're-written'. Finally, participant E suggested the participants were using strategies of self-authoring, developing their ways of making sense of the utterances of others in the process of locating themselves personally and professionally in their Figured World.

These examples reveal some of the strategies used as policy was enacted and personalised. However, in this study what the data written by the participants also reveals is more interesting in terms of policy translation. The participants' skills in using theory in their doctorates and within their own teaching were identified as transformational – 'rebuilding a new fuller person' (Participant 4). Yet participant C signalled the significance of their collaborative working in the research group as significant to the ways in which they were beginning to see themselves as researchers. Indeed what this research offered to the participants was the way in which each demonstrated the use of their developing cultural tools in being researchers, using theory to make sense of the policy context related to their doctoral studies, and their own positioning within it. In many cases, the participants had drawn on the theoretical frameworks that they were prioritising in their own doctorates. They were experimenting with them through their analysis of the shared transcript developed from the process of collaborative auto-ethnography, and in so doing they had begun to act as researchers beyond their doctorates. Drawing on Britzman's work, in the section on knowledge and practice written by participant 3, this paper perhaps illustrates a further step in their process of becoming researchers. Their collaborative experience in this research has weakened the binary that they voiced between theory and practice. In developing a relational forum in which they could be researchers, this study responds to Britzman's call for a dialogic and relational approach which should be 'subject to negotiation, consent and circumstance, inscribed with power and desire, and always in the process of becoming' (2003, 26).

## Recommendations and implications from the research

In a HE policy context in which developing research capacity and quality is pivotal, the shaping and translation of policy to deliver the desired outcomes is complex. The perceptions of these lecturers revealed a perilous pathway in uncertain times (Bauman 2001) in which they had seen themselves as designated within HE as deficient without a doctorate. The participants had positioned themselves as marginalised from the research practices and culture of their institution as they felt that they had no legitimate role without their doctorates. Yet, the opportunity to have a professional dialogic and relational space in which thinking could be explored (McAlpine and Amundsen 2009), and the construction of self, articulated and discussed in a supported way (Akerlind 2005; Sfard and Prusak 2005), had been invaluable. It had encouraged the development of alternative analytical frameworks, which



could be applied to making sense of themselves, within the changing policy context. Furthermore, it helped to fuse and align thinking between colleagues in new ways.

Although the participants in this study were all part-time doctoral students, support for their research had hitherto been restricted to supervisions, and so created limited opportunities to feel part of the research culture within their institution. In some ways, this reflects Gardner and Gopaul's (2012) research on part-time doctoral students, who indicated that they did not feel part of the research cultures of their universities of registration. In this study, however, the expectation might have been different, as each participant was already a lecturer located in HE for their employment. However, engagement with the research environment was not characterised as being inclusive, building a sense of belonging. Participants did not identify with the development of the organisational infrastructure to support them as emerging researchers. Instead, support was understood mainly in terms of payment of contribution to fees for doctoral study, and the award of a small number of hours for research degree study from the annual workload allocation in order to help them achieve their doctorate. There seemed to be a perception by the participants that there was less interest in notions of nurturing research cultures for those who were developing their capacity to be 'research active' through their doctoral study. They felt separate from the language of established research culture.

Three key implications can be distilled here. Firstly, that HE institutions may yield minimal gains if particular outcomes from its staff are seen in technicised ways and mainly in terms of increasing institutional capital. Secondly, the processes of becoming an academic can be enhanced by creating supported collaborative spaces in which staff who are 'becoming researchers' can talk about and use their developing research and theoretical knowledge in ways which lie beyond their immediate supervision for doctoral study. Thirdly, the processes of career development, through gaining a doctorate whilst also employed in HE, is an area of profound struggle for staff. Any policy statement with implications for career development must therefore address the breadth of the requirements and outcomes it seeks to address. This study reveals that institutions might have more chance of policy being enacted in the ways intended if they seek to have a better understanding of the needs of those who they seek to influence. In this study, established research cultures did not offer the context to which these participants felt they could belong, or had any part. Recognition that enabling staff to become researchers may need different support and opportunities as part of the research journey seems clear.

## **The contribution of this research**

This study offers a new contribution to understanding part-time doctoral study as career development for those who are already employed as lecturers in HE. The distinctive contribution in this research is through the insights which the participants give to making sense of their own doctoral experiences through collaborative auto-ethnography, in which they articulate their own position and response to HE policy which they see as framing them in a particular form of deficit. The research participants, together, make sense of their collective experiences of doctoral study through a process which they termed 'wesearch'. This process of both sharing their experiences, interpreting common themes, drawing on and developing theoretical lenses which they were using in their own doctorates, and writing collaboratively, together transformed their institutional positioning to one in which they were emerging as researchers which they felt the institutional policy requirements were restricting. They identified and gave a name to their collaborative experience of research, which in addition to their individual supervisory experiences, was identified as an important part of a process of becoming the researchers which they claim the more technicised requirement of the university had overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

What became evident by the end of the research for this paper was that the process of being voluntarily involved in collaborative auto-ethnography, with others who were also beginning researchers, had itself played a significant part in shaping them as researchers.

Whilst the doctoral experience has been positioned by the participants as primarily an individual experience, the opportunity to discuss with other participants in a similar situation through this collaborative auto-ethnography process, has meant there are benefits to doctoral studies becoming a more socially negotiated construct with peers in a similar experience. Some would argue that this is the purpose of the supervisory team and other research groups within the institution, but for those participants that derive from a 'practice' background, engaging in 'wesearch' has provided a lifeline. (Participant 2)

As global policy drivers steer particular pathways to which universities need to respond, the translation of policy priorities into institutional actions is complex. This study certainly concurs with Blackmore 2014, 192, who indicated that university life is full of 'ambivalence, contradiction and paradox'. As lecturers, undertaking doctorates, seek to navigate their own pathways through current institutional changes and pressures, this paper offers rich insights into the ways in which policy strategies might be more successfully navigated by universities. The way in which those who need to be influenced by policy, interpret it is all-important. As this study reveals, careful consideration of culture and collaboration through carefully supportive accessible opportunities to develop rather than demand skills and competencies, may be more successful in achieving desired changes in research.

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